SOUAD EL- SABAH

FRAGMENTS OF A WOMAN

Translated by
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with an introduction
by
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Introduction

Souad El- Sabah's poetic voice is fresh and vigorous. Combining the distilled calm of the Arabian desert of her native Kuwait with the raging roar of the Arabian Gulf, her voice reverberates with the two irreconcilable tones of her generation— a crystalline purity of soul and a fiery vehemence of passion. Her lyricism is deceptive: it is the flower that grows out of suffering, of identifying with the preoccupations of modern Arab woman who is invariably torn between her traditional image, woven of moonlight beams, and her actual life as a participant in the daily traffickings of the world. It is a lyricism that turns into an instrument of profound

thought, as she reflects in her verse both the aspirations and disillusionments of an Arab mind concerned with Pan- Arab (national) issues and intent on forging a way ahead for Arab men and women in an ever- changing world.

One of the greatest five poets in today's Arab world, Souad El- Sabah has managed to pull down a barrier that had appeared almost insuperable. For a woman to be a poet, rather than a 'poetess', and to actually force her poetic presence on the consciousness of a reading public for long inured to hearing only men's voices, is an achievement of no small proportions. But she has done it with a flair, and has come off with flying colours: few readers could today question her ability or hesitate to submit to her supreme command of the Arabic poetic idiom.

Her achievement is remarkable.The vigour of her poetic tones has won over readers from the four corners of the Arab world, proving that she, having broken through the confines of locality, can now deal with her favourite themes—— women's liberation and the general enlightenment of her fellow Arabs (both men and women) everywhere—— in a language that is immediately appreciated by all Arabs. Her sense of the tradition has helped, no doubt, in producing the solidity of structure which

has been established as the mainstay of Arabic verse down the centuries even when she is at her most original and innovative. Her appeal to the tradition is so unobtrusive, however, that it can elude even the expert; her poetry flows into the mainstream of modernist verse, with the tradition as its distant, carefully- hidden source.

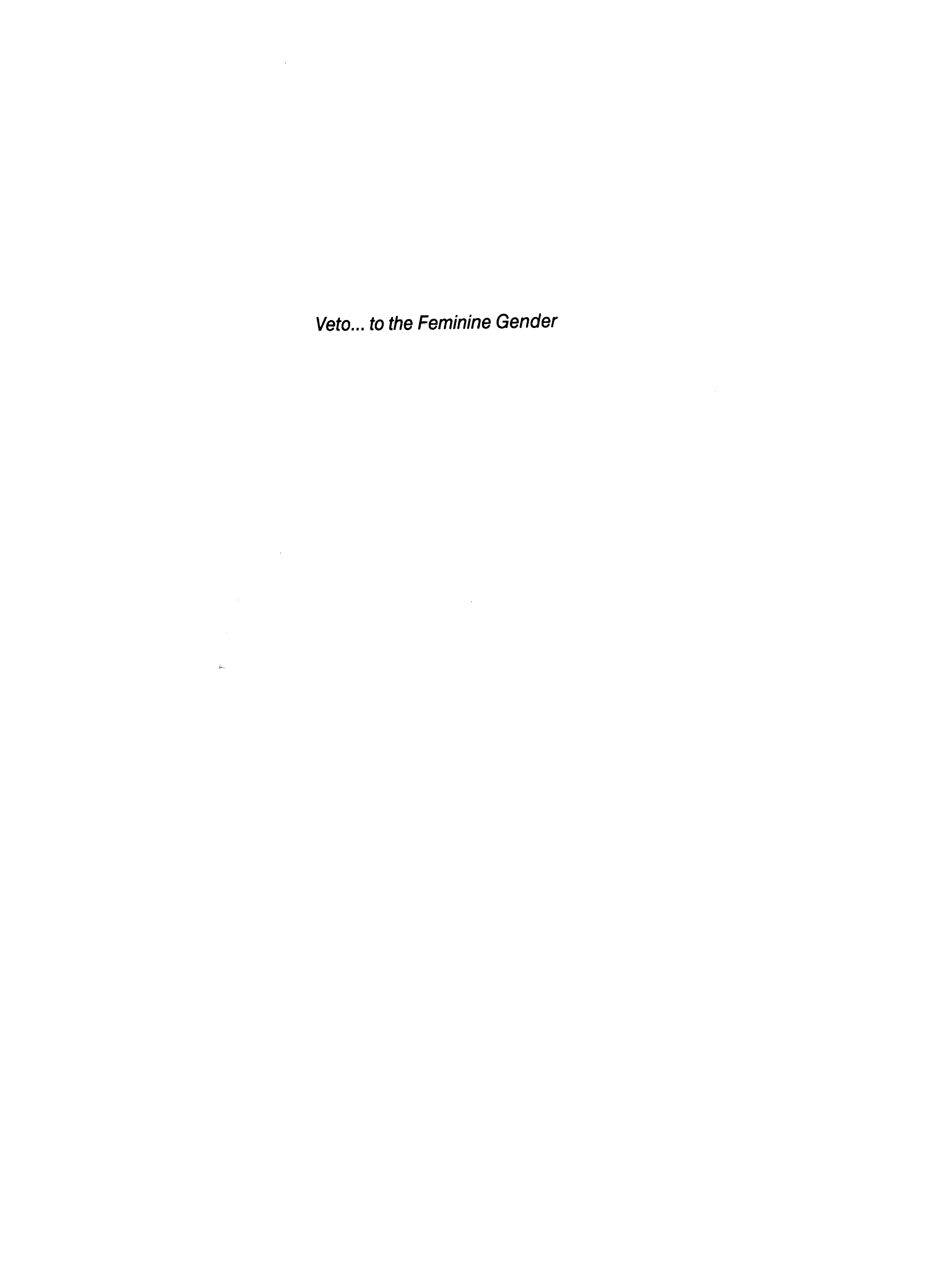
Souad El- Sabah speaks for Arab woman, for wo man in general, and for the Arab nation as a whole. Her private world becomes a microcosm of the world of woman everywhere, as well as the world of all Arabs. A poem may handle a 'private' passion but the wider frame of reference soon emerges in the peculiar handling of image and idea. In other words, the particular in her work leads to the general, and her ability to move from 'inner' to 'outer' realities is truly admirable.

Although she has a Ph. D. in Economics and is a serious scholar, souad El- Sabah has been attracted to the 'craft of verse' since childhood and has many volumes to her credit. Some of the most famous collections, such as *In the beginning was woman, A Wish,* and *To you, my son,* are already part of our modernist tradition, while *Fragments of a Woman,* her chef d'oeuvre, has established her reputation

far beyond the boundaries of Kuwait, her homeland. The General Egyptian Book Organization is proud to present this volume to the English reader, faithfully and beautifully rendered by Professor Nehad Selaiha, of the Higher Institute for Art Criticism, Cairo. It will be regarded, I am sure, as a fair specimen of her work, as Professor Selaiha has kept her eye on the Arabic text and has succeeded in reflecting its most subtle tones.

Samir Sarhan
Cairo, 1989

FRAGMENTS OF A WOMAN



Veto... to the Feminine Gender

(1)

'Tis said
That writing is a grievous sin,
Thou shalt not write.
And so is worship at the shrine of words,
Heretical and profane,
That poison is the sap of verse...
Abstain.

But here I am.
I drank deeply of the spring,
Of the ink standing on my desk,
and I am hale.
And here I am,
With a lot of writing at my back,
The raging fires I have lighted
in the stars,
And neither God has shown his wrath,
Nor the Prophet his disdain.

(2)

'Tis said:
Speech is a man's privilege,
So, seal your lips.
To love and woo is a male art,
So, shut your heart.
That writing is a fathomless sea,
Its waters could close on thee.
But I have loved, and here I am.
And swum the deep, and here I am.
I took upon me all the waters of the seas
But have not drowned.

(3)

'Tis said,
That I have broken down the wall
of virtue with my verse,
That only men are poets.
How can the tribe produce a songstress? !
I laugh at all this nonsense,
And mock the men who in the age of star wars
Still crave to shut women up in the grave.
I often wonder:
Why should the singing of the male beguile,
And that of women be depraved and vile? !

(4)

Why, O, why
Do they erect a mythical wall
To shut the fields from the trees,
Divide the rainclouds from the rain,
And isolate the longing doe from the deer?
Whoever said that poetry had a sex,
Prose a sex,
And thought a sex?
And who can claim that nature
Would reject the warbling of
the beautiful bird?

(5)

'Tis said
That I have shattered the marble on my tomb.
'Tis true.
That I've slaughtered all the bats of our times,
And that's true,
And with my verse have pulled up hypocrisy by the
roots,
And smashed the age of tin and metal scraps.
If they should wound me,
What in the world is lovelier than a wounded doe?

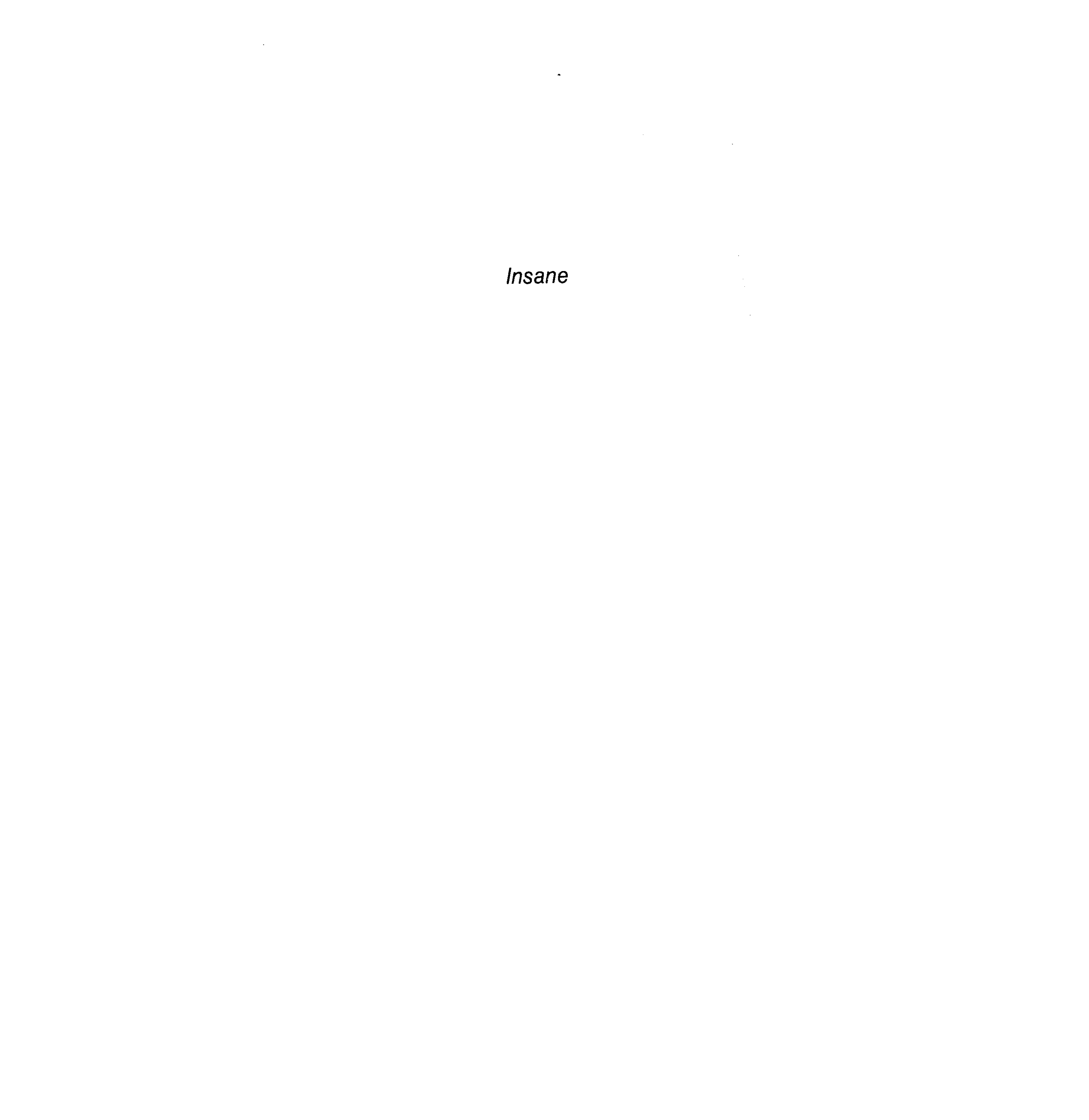
And should they nail me on the cross,I still would
thank them:

They will have put me on a par with Jesus Christ.

(6)

'Tis said,
That femininity is frailty,
That the best of women are the most
contented with their lot,
That emancipation is the fountainhead of
sin,
And that the slave- woman surpasses all in
beauty.
'Tis said,
What an odd crop of grass these
women writers are,
So alien to the Bedouin land!
Indeed, they add, the poetess
Is nothing more than a courtesan.
I laugh at all they say of me,
And spurn the maxims of the age
of tin, and brass,
The logic of the age of tin.

I keep on singing on my lofty peak,
Knowing that thunder comes and goes,
That hurricanes pass
And bats in time depart.
I know that they will pass away,
And that it's I, myself, who will remain.



Insane

(1)

I am completely mad,
And you are sane.
And so, I've flown your garden of reason.
You are the wise
Who chose the sober summer days.
As for me, I embrace the heady
turbulence of the winter.

(2)

I'm sick with love, without a cure.
My body is bound and crushed,
Like the bodies of millions of females.
My nerves are so taut and frayed
That a gentle breath blowing in my ear
Were enough to blow me up into
a floating puff of smoke.

I feel as lost as some stray fish upon the
open seas.
When will you break my siege?
You who in the folds of his coat
has hid the key,
And who controls the smallest occupation
of my day.

(3)

O, my love!
I'm reeling with desire,
For God's sake, shore me up.
Why dwell in the icy pole
When my longings are of the tropics?
O, my love!
I defy the Ten Commandments.
As for history, 'tis nothing but
blood and sand.
I belong to love alone,
And belong nowhere else.
As for home,
It's a clump of lemon trees in your chest.
All the rest is vain and nonsense.



A Woman from Kuwait

(1)

My friend:
In all Kuwaiti women there is something
of the temperament of the sea.
You'd do well to study me, before you
venture on my sea.
My friend:
Don't let my calm deceive you,
For storms can brew behind the mask.
I can be clear and gentle like a lake,
But storm and blaze,
Like a fire.

(2)

My friend:
I have escaped the contamination
of the age of oil,

My faith in God is firm still.
Were you to search the depths of my soul,
You'd find the old black pearls
Deeply planted in its bed.
My friend,
Whom I love to the marrow of my bones,
Everything around me
Is soap bubbles and straw,
So be my sail.

(3)

My friend,
The Kuwaiti woman, if you get
to know her well,
Is a river of love, big and great,
And a cyclone of kohl.
May God protect you from the torrents
of my perfumes and my kohl
A Kuwaiti woman can only love you
madly.
If this be so, what can you know of what I
feel?
In rage, a burning match am I,
In joy, a soft silken thread.

My friend,
A Kuwaiti woman will ne'er speak her
love.
When will you read between the lines?
Under my fragrant trees of tenderness, lie
down,
And in my incense bathe yourself.
For in your land my seeds I've sown,
And in your heart my roots have grown.

My friend,
A Kuwaiti woman has let down her night tresses like
a bridge,

Ignore the guards.
The soldiers,
And the veils,
For she has tired of the clouds of dust,
And all the scorching desert winds,
And longs for the orchard shades,
The music of fountains,
And the song of birds.
The Kuwaiti woman
Is fighting her great battle with history,
The outcome, not decided yet.
Will you support me?
The Kuwaiti woman has named you prince, my
prince,

Control the destinies of the ages,
Conduct my fate.

(4)

My friend,
I am a thousand women rolled in one.
I am the rain,
The lightning,
The music of the spring,
The wild peppermint,
The solitary palm tree,
The tears of all the lyres,
The sadness of the mournful sands.

(5)

My friend,
You who holds in his scarf the light of day and
loosens it,
Whom I would follow till my death, or suicide,
How I have longed that you one day would be
A ring in my ear, a bracelet round my wrist.

(6)

My friend,
Out of millions I have picked you,
Applaud my excellent choice.



Fragments of a Woman



(1)

Dear Sir, I am a female product of an oil- rich land.
Like a dagger I pierce the surface of the sand,
Defy the astrologer's book,
The magic charm and spell,
The terror of the Mamelukes,
And the tyranny of half- men.
I am Fatima,
Who howls like a she- wolf in the night,
When the vehicles of the cave- men come to put her in chains.

Dear Sir,
I must admit I am absolutely mad,
My case beats all description.
My love for you is an old wives' tale,
A figment of the imagination.
All the same, why break this mental fabrication?

(2)

Dear Sir, for God's sake, what have you done to me?

My sole belonging is to you,
My greatest national bond is you,
And all your precepts are the sweetest I have read,
my lord.

On all my travelling papers,
I see your photograph,
And every mirror where I look,
Reflects your face.
Even the tapes I play alone,
Somehow reflect your taste!
Where can I go
When you have conquered all space?
What time have I,
When you've confiscated all time?
You're the roof, the shelter and the prop,
I no longer have a country,
You've become my only one.
You who conquered every inch of me,
And wiped out my personal addresses,
Should they happen to call my name,
Please answer, they mean you.

(3)

Dear Sir, my lord and master!
You govern me without law
Or legislation,
And try to hold me in your hand, like a man holding water.

My spoilt brat whom I could not refine,
To whom I gave the gift of summer,
And in return he gave me storms,
My baby whom I tore out of my womb,
How wonderful you are!

(4)

My lord,
Welcome to my city.
For my beloved one, I have hidden a jasmine in my hair.

You who own me
Without title deeds or witnesses,
My invader without warning, without cavalry or infantry,

You fall upon me like a thunderbolt.
Before you came, I had a land and frontiers,

In love, I lost the land and lost the frontiers.

(5)

Dear Sir.
Remove yourself from my nervous system,
From my writings,
My ink- stand,
My lines,
The veins of my hand.
Get out of my sheets,
Out of the water shower that streams down my body
every morning.
Out of my pins and combs,
And my Arabian Kohl.
It's unreasonable
You should stay a whole year on my lips!
To slay me, and lay the charge at my door- step!

Dear Sir,
Lift your sword of terror off my head.
This is no love,
It is,
To put it mildly,
A barbaric invasion.

(6)

Dear Sir, dear master,
You who made me don the robes of fire for your sake,
I pray you ease your grip on my throat and lungs,
Would you, for the love of God?
Won't you set me free?
Without your eyes I can see no colour,
Without your ears I can hear no sound,
Nor know the sun or sea,
The night and the heavenly bodies.
Ah, Sir,
In the sea of my land, I was a matchless pearl.
My passion has thrown me in your hands,
And here I am,
The fragments of a woman.
Dear Sir,
Try to catch me,
You'll only find the fragments of a woman,
You'll only find the fragments of a woman,
You'll only find the fragments of a woman.

Leaves from the diary

of a Gulf Woman



(1)

I am the Woman of the Gulf,
Between my lips, the Equator passes,
On the threads of my 'Dishdashah',
Gather flocks of white gulls,
And a myriad summer stars,
That shower down from the Garden of God!

(2)

I am the Cedar, evergreen,
The fruit of fire and copper,
The flower of sleep and dreams.
I am the Bedouin
Who came to you out of the China seas,
To be apprenticed in the art of love.
So, teach me!

(3)

I am the Woman of the Gulf,
A fugitive from the cells of the Arabian Nights,
The cell of tribal commandments,
And the authority of the dead.
With you I can defy
The movement of history, the law of gravity,
For I'm the true Arabian palm tree,
A woman who spurns compromises.
Won't you bless my revolution?

(4)

I am the mermaid of the Gulf,
Half- fish, half woman.
I am the sweet flute, the lyre, and the acrid
taste of coffee.
I am the wild, unbroken mare,
That with her hooves will carve the song of freedom.
I'm the marine blue dagger
That means to slay
The mythical dragon of custom.

(5)

I am the Woman of the Gulf.
With bare nails I will fight

To guarantee that everyone has bread,
That rain blesses all.
That love blesses all.
I'll fight the salt of the sea,
The dangerous currents of the deep,
The reverend fathers of the shark teeth,
And the prying eyes of the secret police.

(6)

I am the woman of the Gulf,
Matured in the jars of time.
I am Al- Salimiyyah,
Al- Salihiyyah,
I am Al- Shuwaykh
And Aden.
If you ever wish it,
I could be your homeland.

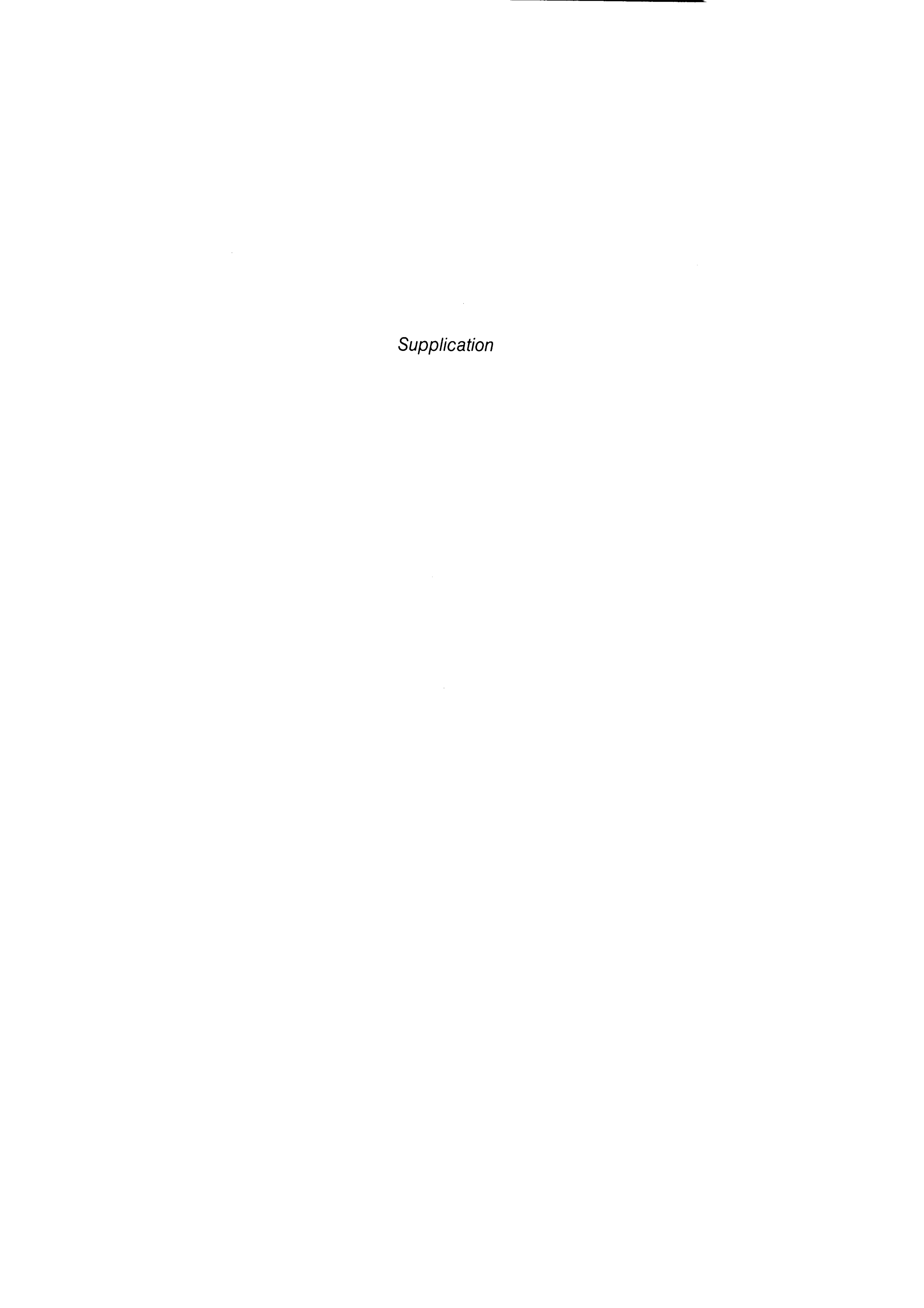
(7)

I'm the gypsy who carries you
In her jingling ankle- bracelets,
In her long dangling ear- rings,
To the ends of the earth,
To the last edge of passion.
You burn me with the whiteness of the snow,

And scald me with the perfumes of the past,
And set my memory ablaze.

(8)

I am the poem you penned with the ink
of femininity,
Your song- bird,
Your island,
And your church.
So hark to the ringing of my bells,
Come to my doors at any time,
And hang your sorrows
On my lashes.



Supplication



(1)

I pray you,
Don't stand between me and my book,
Between the light and my eyes,
Between the kohl and my lashes,
Between my mouth and my voice.
It's an injustice I cannot tolerate.

(2)

I pray you,
Don't stand between my mirror
 and my face,
Between my substance and my shadow,
Between my fingers and my papers,
Between my coffee and my lips,
Between my nightgown and my sheets.
It's an invasion I cannot tolerate.

(3)

I pray you,
Do not grind me
Between my emotional obligations to you
And my historical obligations to the tribe,
Between the paternal ten commandments,
And the ten conjugal ones,
Between my mother's honeyed kisses,
And your furious bloody ones.

(4)

I pray you,
Move out your luggage from my memory inn,
And from my car, the papers and political books
You often left behind,
The bags of peppermint
You used to buy
To win the child in me.

(5)

I pray you,
Take your hands off the hours,

Stop arranging all my days.
Saturday and Sunday, I've surrendered,
And with them Tuesday and Wednesday,
And summer and winter-
All the time on the calendar,
All the time yet to come.
My feudal lord
Who rides his horse over my wrist veins,
And holds in his hands the keys of life,
Who seals my lips with melted wax,
I pray you, for the thousandth time,
Grant me the freedom to yell,
And when it rains
Do not stand between me and the clouds.

To a progressive

from the middle Ages



(1)

If you knew how I love you,
You wouldn't behave like a Pharaoh,
Or make conditions like a conqueror.
If you knew how I love you,
You wouldn't value me as a farmland,
Like a typical landowner.
If you knew how I love you,
You wouldn't treat me like an antique chair,
Or some old text in the chronicles of the past.

If you knew how I love you,
You wouldn't need suppression
Or coercion,
Or the edge of a sword,
Or any of the tools of tyrants.

(2)

Sir,
If you regard femininity as a stain,
A mark of shame upon the brow,
Then tell me how
You're different from the stone- age man?
You took a monopoly on intelligence,
Made yourself sole moon,
And only ruler of the skies.
You resent my triumphs,
Hate to see admirers
Swarming round me.
You fear my success,
My scintillation,
And even my jasmine perfume.
I can't believe
A man could hate the smell of jasmine.

(3)

An intellectual! Are you?!
But believe in burying women alive at birth?!
What sort of culture is this? What kind of intelligentsia?
An intellectual,

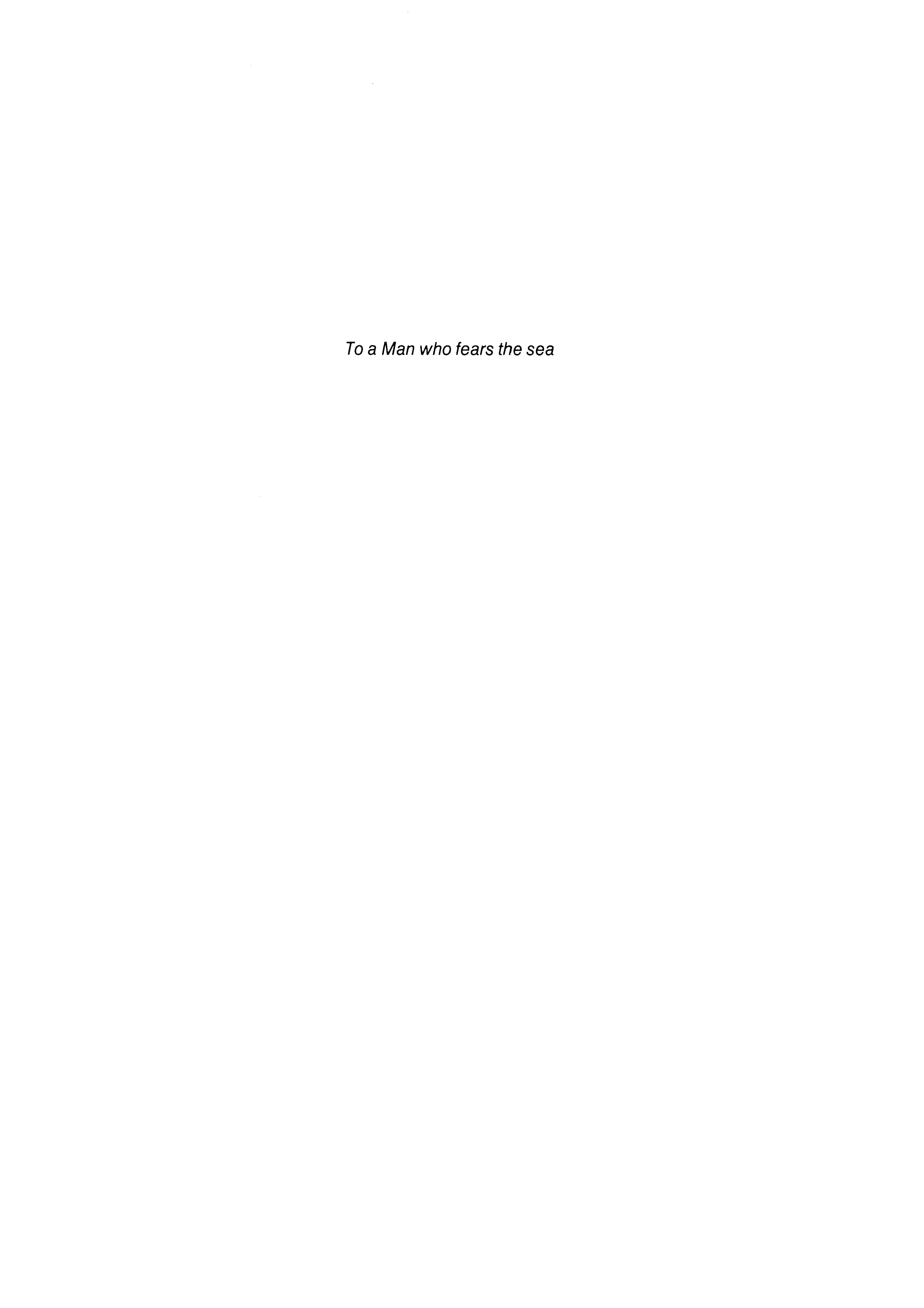
Who'd keep his woman in the vaults of time?!

A progressive writer,
With a backward concept of woman?!
Who if a woman smiles at him
Trembles at the wrath of God?!
You, who advocate tolerance and justice,
And free love,
I believe you are the lord of bigots and fanatics.

I would never have thought you belonged in the dark
ages

So deeply and fervently!
I took you for a better species,
But, alas, you proved
A replica of the others.





To a Man who fears the sea



(1)

I cancelled the date for our trip.
The sea would make you sick,
And love gives you a headache.
Your soft velvety skin
Can neither stand the saltness of the sea
Nor the bites of the sharks.
I tore up my ticket
And decided to relieve you
From the changes of the weather,
The smell of ships,
The crazy distance,
Because my kisses give you an allergy,
And sleeping on deck would soil your starched shirt
And dishevel your hair, carefully styled
By the best hairdresser in town.

(2)

Stay on land, my little one,
With your hard rocky memory
That cannot withstand the removal to a new land.
Stay forever in the realm of leaves and shadows,
With its eternal curfews,
Eternally fixed addresses,
And eternally fixed history.
Stay fixed in your place, like a railway clock,
Or some silly political poster,
Or a compulsory stop for state - run buses.

(3)

Dear Sir,
You cross your legs,
And gurgle with your old conquests.
I relieve you from flattering me,
Or writing to me,
Or appearing with me in public.
I don't intend to catch you out at your game,
And force you to be a lover against your will,
Or a martyr of love,
Against your will.
I'd hate you to lose one finger,

One hair,
Or a single jewel
From your throne.
You're staid and sober;
I am chaotic;
You're a society star,
I am a gypsy,
Ignorant of the social masks,
Untutored in the art of public relations.

(4)

Dear Sir,
You sheathed your sword
And shelved your fighting instinct.
I free you of all emotional obligations:
You don't have to go out alone at night,
For the cold might hurt you,
As walking with me in the public garden used to hurt
you,
As going with me to the sheltered cafes used to hurt
you.
I set you free, dear sir, of everything,
For you are not very good at suffering.

(5)

Remain forever where you are,
A slave to your daily dull routine:
Coffee at eight,
Your morning paper
At eight twenty,
And breakfast at nine.
Stay buried in your files,
Your mail, and the clouds of your Havana cigars,
Firmly entrenched like an Egyptian obelisk.

Dear Man,
You're strung up on the gallows of time,
Stay buried in your sheets and calculations.
Or keep standing on the safe wharf.
But I
Will ride the sea,
And voyage on the waves of poetry,
And travel with the lightning.
I shall travel in all the things
That know not time.

The World... is You



Take up a map of the world,
And rearrange it as you choose.
The continents would still be you;
The seas would still be you;
And I, myself, would still be you.
In the beginning of geography was your name.
Your eyes gave their colour to the seas;
Your mouth gave the world night and day.
And the rhythms of your voice,
Your hands and throbbing veins,
Have given birth to me.
Your love chases me,
Like an ever- hungry shark,
Over the water, under the water.
It carefully marks my weak spots,
Then hits, relentlessly,
Lashing my face,
Lashing my chest,
Lashing my back,
Lashing my fingers,
Until my blood
Dyes the oceans red.



A Peace Treaty



(1)

Come,
Let's have a peace treaty
Which gives me back the days
You've put under your rule,
And the mouth you've besieged with your lips.
You'll recover, in return,
That smell of yours that sails under my skin.

(2)

Phrase it as you like,
Condition it as you will,
I'll sign it blank.
I'll sign anything
That frees me from your list of telephone numbers,
And the furniture of your office.
Anything that removes you from the rhythm of my life,
And tears you out of the pupils of my black eyes.

(3)

Let's try, even for a day,
To play at this impossible game.
Why don't I ring a casual male acquaintance?
And you could ring up some female.
With your permission,
I won't worry when you're absent,
Nor leap in blissful joy when you are back.
Allow me
Not to be anxious when you're sick,
Nor be a friend in need and share your grief.
Our peace accord, you see,
Forbids me worrying over thee.

(4)

Write
Your own death sentence with your hand,
And I will do the same.
Come, shall we try the grandest folly?
Shall I declare to the world I do not love you?

Shall we try, even in play,
What suicide feels like?


Coffee Time



(1)

I caught you pouring your black coffee
Out of the dark rivers of my eyes,
And reading in them your morning paper.
I, therefore, began frequenting the coffee houses,
That you might drink me,
And started buying the morning papers,
That you might read me.

(2)

I caught you
Hiding behind the glass of the small mirror in my
handbag
As I was leaving my hotel.
I forgot the place of my appointment,
The time of my appointment,

With whom was my appointment,
And decided to stay with you.

(3)

I caught you
Stealing the golden corn out of my hair,
And stuffing it into your school satchel.
I ordered you to stop your game,
But you defied me.
I slapped your hand
To warn you off the grain,
It was no use.
I tried to send you back to school,
But you refused.
Instead, you slept under my willow hair.



Permanent Residence



I made you a gift of the keys of my city,
Appointed you governor,
Sacked all my counsellors,
Tore the cuffs of fear off my wrists,
Shook the terror of the tribe off my back.
I wore a dress embroidered with the threads of ardour,
Shadowed my eyes with the light of your eyes,
Planted an orange blossom in my hair——
You had once given it to me——
And sat on my throne, waiting,
Hoping for a permanent residence
In the city of your heart.

Your perfume cuts through my thoughts
Like a metal sword,
Pierces the walls, the curtains,
And me,
Scatters the hours,
Disperses me.
You get up and go,
And leave me alone to tread, barefoot,
Over the debris of my shattered glass.





The Wisest of the fools



(1)

They speak of all the ages,
Of Rome,
And Athens,
Of Florence,
And the weeping domes of Cordova,
Which every night shed Arabian tears.
They speak of the seven wonders of the world,
And forget you, my own wonder.
They tell of the golden age of the Cphalif
Al- Ma 'moun,
Forgetting
That yours is the only golden age,
That only in your bonds,
Do I find my freedom.

(2)

They talk of old books
Great leaders,
Famous lovers,
Of painters,
Musicians,
Great poets,
Explorers and great inventors,
But no one mentions you
My great explorer, who discovered my femininity
even before I did,
And invented me
Long before they invented poetry or discovered fire.
No one knows the miracle you performed
When you transformed me in seconds
Into a burning part of the sun,
Into a burnished gold ingot.

(3)

They dwell long on the histories of mad lovers,
The possessed, the bewitched,
And the fools

Who strangled themselves with their sweethearts' plaits of hair,
Or lost themselves in the woods of sorrow ,and never came back,
Or fought till death for a woman,
Or whirled a million times through the space of passion
Until they burnt.
How much I've read about them all!
About Qays Ibn Al- Mulawwah,
Deek Al- Jin Al- Hummusi,
And Van Gogh.
Still, I could never find a wiser madman than you,
Nor a sane man madder than you are.

(4)

I read of kings who gave up royal thrones
To win the throne of love.
But you, who taught me the A B C of love,
And enrolled me in the academy of passion,
Should never give up your throne.

(5)

I read all the dictionaries of love,
The correspondences of lovers,
I read *Tawq Al- Hamama*,

The *Song of Songs,* **and David's** *Psalms,*
I read the whole of Ovid, and *Elsa's Eyes.*
But, still, I have not found a story
Great enough for our dreams,
A poem big enough to house us both,
Or a language with space enough for us to grow.

Nor could I find, my love,
In all the libraries I visited,
And all the books I read
A word that sums me up,
Or a word that sums you up.
You who have left me bleeding on the splinters of a
shattered impossible language,

I pray you,
Leave me free to seek a language of my own.



Five O'clock Tea



(1)

Tea with you at five o'clock,
Is Holy Writ.
It shadows me wherever I go,
In England, or Malaysia,
America, or the Caribbean isles,
In heaven and on earth,
In this real world,
Or the hypothetical Utopia I invent
And draw on paper when alone.

(2)

It's not simply the strict observance of routine that
obsesses the English Woman;
I'm not English, but Kuwaiti to the bone,
And I love you to the marrow of the bone.

But tea at five o'clock
Has become part of my heritage,
And second nature to me.
One of a thousand habits I acquired from you,
Which gave me so much happiness,
And so much pain.
And so, when teatime comes I scream and bawl
Like a baby demanding his feed.

(3)

Five o'clock tea
Rings like a bell in the church of my heart.
It's a daily prayer I observe,
For you've become my only source of faith,
My only temple and place of worship.

(4)

Five o'clock tea
Is my elixir and panacea;
It's also,
My poisonous draught.

(5)

Five o'clock tea
Is a curse and a blessing,
A smile and a tear,
An oasis and a predicament.
It is the cross on which I bleed,
The scourge that tears my back,
Every time I sit at a table for two
And order tea for two,
One for me,
And one for...
God knows when you'll come!



My Body is a palm tree
That Grows on shatt Al- Arab



(1)

I am the daughter of Kuwait,
Of the sandy shores that slumber
By the waters like a gorgeous deer.
In the mirror of my eyes,
The night stars embrace the palm trees.
From this spot sailed my ancestors in fishing boats,
And came back with the impossible catch.

(2)

I am the daughter ofKuwait.
I grew up with the pearls of the sea,
And nestled in my lap the shells and stars.
The sea was kind to me, and, Oh! so liberal!
Then came the damned devil of oil,

And all fell prostrate at his feet,
And worshipped night and day.
We forgot the desert ethics, its honour, and hospi-
tality,
Our coffee mortars, our ancient poetry,
And drowned in trivialities.
All that was bright, real and great
Was swept away.

(3)

I'm the daughter of Kuwait.
Inhabiting the sun,
I number the morning among my surnames.
My forefathers explored the waves, the sea,
And the music of the wind.
They befriended death and tirelessly pursued their
dreams,
With horse and sword,
With never a moment's repose.
Then came the curse of oil,
And what was forbidden became common practice.
Our orchards became hot beds of sin,
And the cheap perfume of foreign adventuresses

Filled the night air.
At their feet gold was strewn,
And on their bodies drinks were lined.
Indeed, my countrymen,
This is how a nation should fight!
On the old wall, meanwhile,
An antique sword of my father's hangs weeping.
Even the sword has despaired!

(4)

My country, I don't know you any more!
Are you this land of markets and bazaars?!
Of bouncing cheques,
And gambling shops,
And fifty sharks prowling around our seas?
Is this the Kuwaiti people
Slaughtered by the mafia in broad daylight?
Rise up in anger, O my land!
You never fought except with words.
The offspring you brought to the world in long and painful labour,
Are now the knights parading in the money-changers lane.

(5)

Rise up in anger,
O my land. Long have you slumbered
In your bed of gold.
Rise up in anger!
You quench your thirst with oil,
And build your throne on firewood,
Rise up in anger!
For gold has made you drunk,
And vanity made you blind.
I won't believe that oil is a fate we can't escape;
No fire- worshipper am I
Who with her children feeds the cursed flame.

My country,
Put down the currencies bulletin, leave the stock-
exchange,
And join the Arab forces.
In Lebanon, children die;
The land is daily raped.
In anger, rise my land!
For only anger tills the land.

(6)

I am the daughter of Kuwait.
Whenever I think of today's Arabs, I weep.

When I remember what became of Quraysh,
The Prophet's tribe, after his death,
I can't check my tears, and weep.
When Basrah , with her drenched coat, flashes through my mind,
I glance at my mother's face, and weep.
And when I think of dear Baghdad and its quarters,
The Iraqi army fighting for our honour,
I weep.
I often ask the people how they feel,
And sadly wonder,
Can blood turn to water?
Can blood turn to water?!
But no one hears or answers.
I sit and weep, and weep again
To think of those who have betrayed
The sacred ties of history, of kith and kin,
And never gave Baghdad any succour or support
In her historical battle.
I weep to think
How they could stop their ears to her
Who's been to them a home, a shelter and a roof.

(7)

Sometimes I dream of Salah Al- Din
Begging for a crust of bread in the alleys of Jerusalem,
Begging at the doors of the knights of Arabia;
Sometimes I see him in the desert,
Lost and wandering, searching for the old tribes,
For Tai, Tamim, and Ghuzayyah,
Or in a police station,
Thrown against the wall without identity or bail.
I, then, cry, from the depths of my wound:
Curse you, age of mediocrity
In which the Arab's sword has lost his identity!

(8)

I am the daughter of Kuwait.
Whenever I think of today's Arabs, I weep.
When I remember what became of Quraysh,
The Prophet's tribe, after his death,
I can't check my tears, and weep.
When I behold this dear homeland
Racked by oppression and suppression, I weep.
When I examine yesterday's map

And see our map today,
I weep.
Whenever I see a bird in Rome
Or Paris sing
Without fear, I always weep.
And when I see an Arab boy
Sucking hatred at the breast of Arab radios,
I weep.
Whenever I see an Arab army
Opening fire on civilians,
I weep.
And every time a ruler boasts of his people's love,
Of ruling by consensus of opinion, or of the freedom
of speech
I weep.
Whenever I am questioned about my passport
By some policeman at an Arab port.
I turn my back and leave,

(9)

I am the daughter of Kuwait.
Could my heart dry up one day,
And stiffen, like a wooden hobby horse,
Grow cold and unfeeling,

Like a wooden hobby horse?
Can I ever be anything but an Arab?
My body is a palm tree fed by the waters of Shatt-
Al- Arab,
And my soul reflects all the errors, all the sorrows,
All the hopes of the Arabs.
I shall always keep on waiting
For the Mahdi to arrive,
A singing bird in his eyes,
A shining moon,
And the first drops of rain.
I shall always keep on searching
For a willow and a star,
And the garden behind the mirage.
I shall always keep on waiting
For the flowers that will sprout
Under all these ruins.



A Love poem, to an Iraqi sword



(1)

I am a woman
Who decided to fall in love with Iraq
And marry him in the presence of all her tribe.
For since childhood,
The nights of Iraq were the kohl of my eyes,
And the soil of Iraq was the henna of my hands.
I let my hair grow long
Like the palm trees of Iraq.

I am a woman
Unlike any other.
I am the sea, the sun, and the pearl.
It is my disposition to marry a sword,
And a million palm trees,
And a million Tigris.
I also wish, one day, to marry
The neighing of the pure Arabian horses.

For how can I love,
If love is not baptized at the font of heroism?

And how can women love men
Who have lost their manliness?

(2)

I am a woman
Who likes to be herself,
And when I love,
I don't flatter.
I am a woman of the south of Iraq;

Between my eyes, slumbers Babylon,
And on my forehead,
Passes the ancient pageant, with its peoples and tribes.

Sometimes, I am a Sumerian scene,
Sometimes, a Babylonian vineyard,
At times an Arab flag,
And my wedding night is the battle of Qadissiyah.

My marriage takes place under the shadow of swords,

And by the light of torches;

My dowry is a beautiful Arabian horse, and five
sticks of corn.
What more could a woman want of love, except
A love poem,
A moment of pride and glory,
And a fighting sword?
What more glory for a woman
Than to find herself sparkling
In the eyes of a fighter?

(3)

Bless all the memories of Shatt- Al- Arab;
Bless the water- bird dancing among the reeds;
Bless the sun that sets in the gulf
Like a golden bracelet;
Bless my father
Who gave me for my birthday,
A book of poems;
Bless my mother's gentle face,
Bright as the moon.

Bless the palm that grows by the house,
And bears the best fruit;

Bless the jovial bursts of thunder;
Bless the rain drops;
Bless the sighs and moans of the masts,
And the sadness of the ships before departure.

Iraq, my Iraq!
When I speak your name my lips blossom like trees
in springtime.

I cannot help my feelings,
For it is my destined fate,
To love you.

(4)

I am a woman who decided to fall in love with Iraq.

Why Iraq?
Why all the passion for Iraq?
Why all the poems for Iraq?
Because the morning here
Shines brighter;
The wounds here
Are deeper,
And the eyes of women
Hide the weapons deep in their darkness.

Why Iraq?
Why do tears flood the eyes of lovers
When the Euphrates floods its banks?
Why do the treasures of Baghdad
Preserve kohl and memories above all else?
Why does the Iraqi tune
Penetrate the heart?
Why prayer at the tomb of Ali
Is worth a thousand prayers?

(5)

Why
Should Baghdad alone defend our land?
Alone guard the gates?
Alone guard our honour?
And alone guard our wealth?
Why
Should the Iraqi alone die for the sacred task
While the people of the desert
Are drunk without being really drunk?
Oh, how they love chasing birds!
And venison too,
And bustards!

Why should the Iraqi shed his blood
While they sing of 'Hend' or plead with 'Nuwara'?!
Why should he die when paltry men
Buzz around aimlessly at night and sleep all day?
Why should he die, when the addicts of soft living
Inhabit the bars of Paris and its luxury flats?
Without Iraq, they would be slaves.
Without Iraq they would be mere dust.

(6)

Why I love Iraq? Indeed, why?
As if I had a choice!
Is not Baghdad our shield?
The wall that bravely stood up to the Tatars?



To Gamal Abdul- Nasser



(1)

With him we loomed large in the chronicles of time,
Like fiery steeds that set ablaze the horizon.
He was our mythical eagle who promised
To bear us on his wings to the shores of safety.
He was as vast as space,
As bright as beacons,
Fresh and invigorating like a new prophecy,
With the deep voice of an ancient high priest,
And eyes that flashed with constant lightning
Like fire answering fire.

(2)

With him we shone like suns
That spread their light on all the worlds.
With him we stood like flinty rocks,

That never knelt in humiliation.
We called ourselves Nasser,
When we forgot our names,
And always called him father,
When we were fatherless.
He broke our slavery bonds,
And freed us from our fear.
He was the man
Who made us feel human at last.

(3)

He was the most glorious of our history,
The tallest palm in our desert,
The dream that blossomed in our eyes,
The poem that burst, like lightning, from our lips.
He soared with us above the world's map,
Scoffing at all artificial barriers,
At those fabricated upstart kingdoms,
Their tight, ridiculous patchwork outfits,
Their faded, tattered flags.

(4)

He was made in our image,
We were born in his;
He read history in our eyes,
We read the future in his.
We held high our heads,
Inspired by the pride on his brow;
We held tight our fists
Inspired by the strength of his hands.
Our children were nursed on the milk of his revolution.
He was the strength in our hearts.
The blue flame in our pupils,
The raging wind, the tempest and the flood.

(5)

He was the mahdi in our eyes,
And hid the rain under his coat,
And if he played his flute,
The trees were sure to follow him.
On his brow were ears of corn and wheat,
And in the ring of his voice an echo of the call for prayer.

He had the power to make the corn grow,
To bring together the scattered tribes,
Stimulate the ancient pride of Arab knights,
And recover the lost kingdom of the Arabs.

(6)

He was the lodestar of our voyaging,
The evergreen word in our heritage,
The Messiah of our new faith.
It was he who baptized us;
It was he who united us.
It was he who taught us:
That the people turn the tables on their jailers,
And if you starve them
They will gnaw the prison bars.

(7)

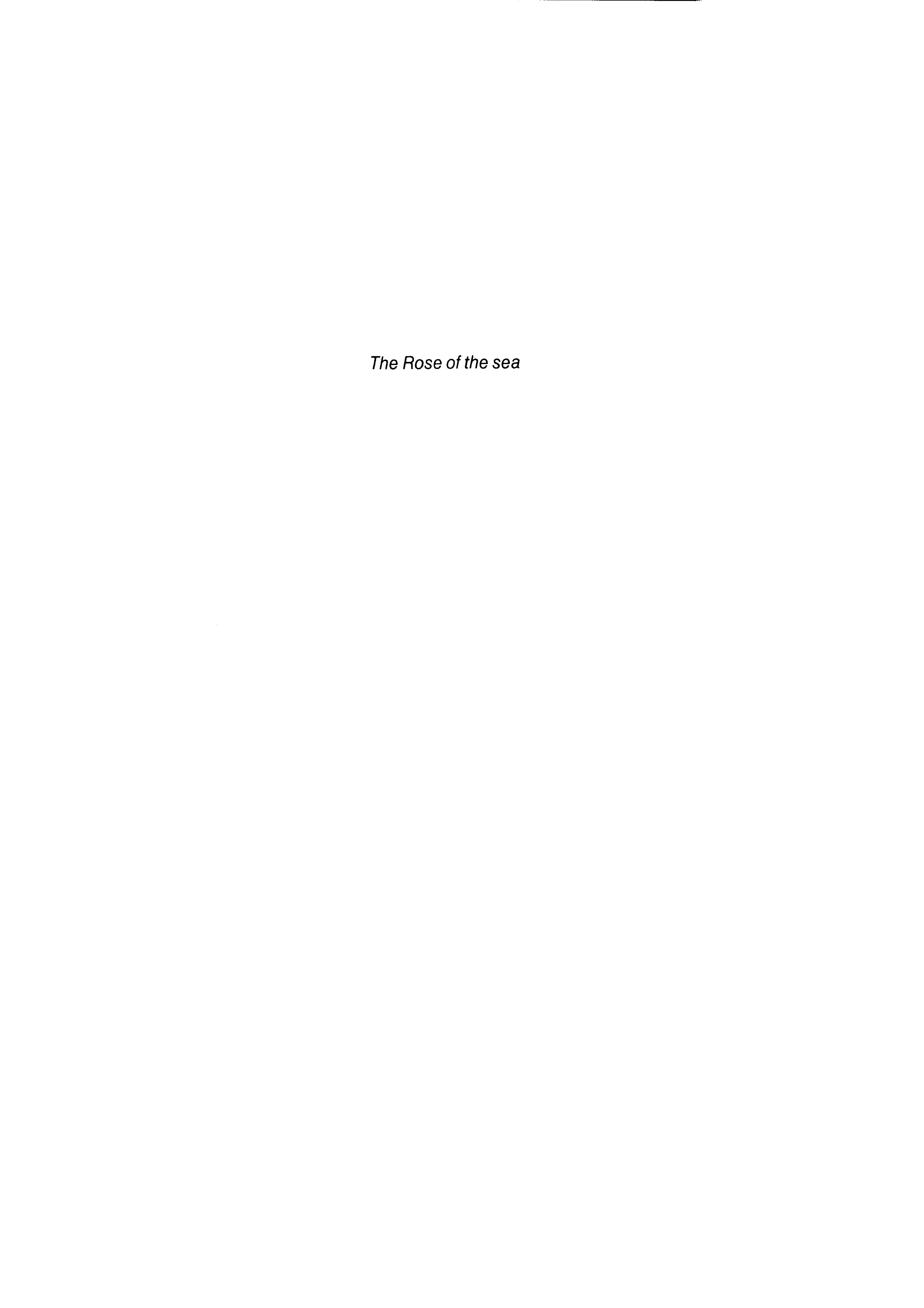
O, Nasser! So far away! So sorely missed!
We hold out our hands to you
When besieged by mist and frost;
We search the nights for your eyes,

But only stumble on illusions and mirages.
Nasser, the great,
Where art thou gone?
Without you, there's no poetry and no prose, neith-
er thought nor books.
Now you're gone, the sword sleeps undisturbed,
And the flies are vultures.

(8)

Nasser, the great,
Do you follow in your exile the news of home?
One part is stolen,
Another is let;
One part is torn and rent,
Another is patched up;
One part has gone for normalization,
Another for isolation,
And a third for a policy of open- doors.
One part favours peace,
Another, capitulation.
Some other parts have neither a roof nor doors.

Nasser, the great,
Don't ask about the Arabs.
They have mastered the art of abuse,
And use for words claws and fangs.
Their peoples live surrounded by spears and fire.
Nasser, the great,
Forgive me, when words fail me,
For this is the time of doom.



The Rose of the sea



(1)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
The ports whence time sailed;
A love oasis, a safe shore;
A great people,
A bounteous God,
And a land fenced with vigorous pride.

(2)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
Gleaming shores like polished mirrors;
A sea that sprinkles every morning
A thousand gifts;
The aroma of my father's tea,
The smile of mother,

My satchel, my plaited hair,
And the glass of milk before going to school;
The first love letter I received,
That stirred up a tempest in my blood.

(3)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
I carry you around,
Wherever I go
Like a charm near my heart,
Like a rose- bud in my hair,
Like a deep tattoo on my chest,
And will do so to the end,
To the very end
Of my days.

(4)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
Here, Sinbad set off on his travels.
Here, the rose of the sea blossomed,
And here Ibn Majid

Plucked a star, planted palm trees,
And built, through the moments of defiance, a coun-try.
Here palms and poetry bathe together
In the waters of the gulf.
So, sing of the faithful 'Rabab'*,
And sing of the absent 'So'ad'*,

(5)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
I love you like the sun; to the world you give light.
I love you like the earth; to the hungry you give corn.
You share the sorrows of those who live in fear,
And the wounds of the rebels.

(6)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
The freedom of speech has a long history here;
It is your birth- right.
The beautiful child of love nestles in your arms.

---

* The heroines of 2 famous Arabic poems.

The roots of Arabism stretch deep in your soil,
Like the roots of your palm trees.
Remain as always, a big warm heart,
A shining star,
A beacon for the lost,
A soft pillow for weary heads,
A mother like all mothers,
And embrace all your children.

(7)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
How I love your kind smile,
The tones and rhythms of your laugh.
I love you too, tired and silent,
And love the depths of your eyes when you're sad.
I love you when I am away,
And miss your every pebble and stone.
I love you in spite of the Moguls' lances,
And the Tatars' hordes.
I love you most when your sky
Is embroidered with thunder and shot through with sparks of lightning.
How beautiful you become in the face of terrible danger!

(8)

Kuwait, Kuwait!
The Arab world has decided to assassinate the word.
It also decided
To exterminate all the beautiful birds, and all pigeons.
We are homeless birds that demand nothing but the right of speech;
We are intellectual birds that can't stand
Brain- washing and broken bones.
We are militant words
That will defeat with poetry all the dark ages.

I'll be happy if my country
Remains an open sanctuary for birds of every race,
And a home for all poets and singers.
I'll be happy if the soil of my country
Becomes the violets' and the martyrs' holy shrine,
Gives a roof to all the victims, made homeless by Arab wars.
I'll be happy if my country
Remains the glorious isle of freedom
Where the dawn breaks when he wishes
And the sea roars as he wills.
I'll be happy if my country remains an open free space,

And a window that lets in the fresh clean air.

For in this age of police states, the secret service

Has shut away the sky, confiscated our luggage, our
passports,

And sent the moonlight to jail.

A Thousand poets

for one Iraqi Helment



(1)

The sword is poised on the throat,
And poets keep on writing;
The thorn has pierced the flesh to the bone,
And poets keep on lying,
And preach on paper what they don't practise.
What are we doing here at 'Mirbad', spitting out
poetry,
Against a horizon of burning embers, shrapnel and
blood?
Our seats have grown sick of us,
Our summers and winters are alike.
Age of philologists and morphologists,
We've had enough of your nonsense,
Of your verbiage,
Of your gossip and slanders.
Give me a sword
And take the works of all the poets.

Give me justice,
And take away all the teaching of the prophets.
Give me bread,
For the bread made in heaven does not fill my
stomach.
Give me the people
And take sway all the crowns of kings and caliphs.
What are we doing here in 'Mirbad' day and night,
Discussing in which key singers should sing,
On which linguistic bed the poets will recline
And soundly sleep?!
Give me a spot of land I may call home,
Free of hangmen and informers.
Give me a spot of land I may call home,
Without cells and dungeons.
The edge of the sword is poised on the throat
And poets keep on writing,
The thorn has pierced the flesh to the bone
And poets keep on lying,
And preach on paper what they never practise.

(2)

Relieve us Mirbad,
For the love of God

Of the heroics of the drunk,
And the dialogues of the dead.
The dinosaurs are still with us here,
Devouring the hall, the doors, the audience,
Attacking us with rimes and heavy clubs.
They are back after millions and millions of years.
O, Mirbad!
Stop this wholesale massacre,
And close this fairground booth of mercenaries and
parasites;
Hear them chattering, gibber-jabbering,
In tetrameters, in pentameters or trimeters,
In iambic or trochaic,
Unaccented, accented, or accented unaccented,
Ah! This is the great battle of the metre!
Who would remove this sword of metre hanging
over our heads?
O, age of artifice! of cheap embellishments and clev-
er 'coupleting'!
Of terza rima, ottava rima and quatrains!
Not an age of poets, but of technicians and crafty
craftsmen.
The gorge rises at the scene.
Down with all rimers!
O, age of failure and collapse! We've tired

Of the political market- place, its consumer merchandise,
And the cheating gamesters.
O, age of incessant defeats, why, O why
Should poetry lick the boots of conquerers?
Age of slaughter and mass murder,
Of the massacres of Sabra and Shatila,
Why does poetry become tongue- tied in the presence of butchers?
O, age that beggars description!
Why should the word kiss the feet of the prince of the faithful?!

(3)

O, Mirbad!
We've fallen into the jaws of grammarians,
In the clutches of their mafias.
Poetry is in the hands of the mafia,
Criticism in the hands of the mafia,
Unaccented, accented, unaccented.
O, age of Arab nomads,
Of the exile and the diaspora.

O, age of an Arabic tongue
That has lost the use of words,
Age of ugliness, how can you breed any artists
In my country?!
On which cross, out of whose tears are they to be
born?

Give me a spot of land I may call home,
Without cells and dungeons.
The edge of the sword is poised on the throat,
And poets keep on writing.
The thorn has pierced the flesh to the bone,
And poets keep on lying,
And preach on paper what they don't practise .

(4)

Iraq, the abode of love!
How often have we come?
Felt enraptured by the music?
Swayed and cricled to its beat like dervishes,
Laughed and cried,
And recited the worst possible verse
Until we roused the wrath of God?!

We went on and on,
On and on,
Clinging to the rostrum
Until the audience took matters into their own hand,
And with a razor blade slashed our wrists.

Iraq, home of poetry!
We came to you dressed in ancient robes,
With no revelations,
No sparks and flashes,
And no fresh visions.
The loaded coaches arrived from every country,
But poetry never came,
The 'subject' and 'object' arrived,
And all the parts of speech and the declensions,
Together with the high priests, the merchants, and the Arabists.
The calculators came, but not the mad ecstacy of poets.
Forgive us Iraq, forgive us home of poetry.
When man became oppressed in our countries, the poet went blind.
Give me a spot of land I may call home,
Without cells and dungeons.
The edge of the sword is poised on the thoat,

And poets keep on writing.
The thorn has pierced the flesh to the bone,
And poets keep on lying,
And preach on paper what they don't practise.

(5)

Dear masters,
What is poetry doing here,
Loitering among the sweet basil of the garden
And the sweet basil of the cheeks?!
What should a poet sing of
In an age of treachery and ingratitude?
Here is a friend who has sided with the Persians
against us;
Here is another who prefers to dwell among the Jews
in their ghettos.
I wonder, are we singing of our age,
Or pre- historic times?
Our age? What an age!
Without taste, smell, or colour,
Deserted by the genuine Arabs, and poepled by
the Arabists.

The sword has retired, and pensioned off his dreams.
The conquerors too are all retired.
The edge of the sword is poised on the throat,
And poets keep on writing.
The thorn has pierced the flesh to the bone,
And poets keep on lying,
And preach on paper what they don't practise.

(6)

You poetry
Who could set afire the trees of heaven,
Who eats at my heart day and night,
And drills me till I faint,
Will you accept this humiliation?
Are you not the offspring of pride?
What is Baghded doing to me?
I am already in love with her up to my ears.
What is Baghdad kindling in me?
She is already my refuge and my only home.
O, Iraq of roses and water, how wonderful you are!
You stand like an eagle poised at the gates of history,

And we never gave you your due.
You kept your suffering folded in your heart,
And we have failed to appreciate it.
All the knowledge that we have, all the alphabets we
know
Could never reach your little finger.

(7)

Save me Mirbad from my predicament!
My words are water, Baghdad is fire.
Give me the squall of the gale
And take away the voice of the nightingale;
Give me the lips of the red gash that blossomed in the
'Fao' battle,
And take away my lover's lips.
Give me an Iraqi fighter's helmet,
And take a thousand poets.

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